

L'avventura Antonioni's *L'avventura* and Deleuze's Time-image

by Hamish Ford

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The Cannes Film Festival, 1960. Over two hours into a new Italian film, a woman runs down the imposing corridor of a baroque hotel in extreme long shot. Spectators shout: “cut, cut!” amid frequent laughter and jeering.

This was the first audience response to Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'avventura*, a film that seems to allow carefully composed images and sequences to remain on-screen beyond their use-by date in rendering an already threadbare narrative. The screening was such a disaster that Antonioni and the star of the film, Monica Vitti, fled the cinema.

The next morning a petition circulated at Cannes among filmmakers and critics, protesting at the audience's behaviour and forcing a second screening of what they claimed was a challenging, modern film which rendered time and space in radically new ways. The festival arranged for a second screening, following which *L'avventura* was awarded a tailor-made Cannes prize: “For the beauty of its images, and for seeking to create a new film language” [\(1\)](#).

Two years later, the *Sight and Sound* Top Ten poll proclaimed *L'avventura* the second best film of all time behind *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941). This remarkably swift canonisation (can anyone imagine such a thing today?) indicates the extent to which many critics and filmmakers strongly felt that Antonioni's film was a revolutionary work in the history of cinema, and that this thematically serious and resolutely modern approach to film form ought to be polemically encouraged.

32 years later I programmed the film at an undergraduate film society. Out of 20-odd viewers, three genuinely appeared to love *L'avventura*, while the rest denounced one of the most frustrating films they'd ever seen (even making some Cannes-like disapproving noises during the screening).

What is it about *L'avventura* that causes such a difficult relationship between Antonioni's cinema and viewers from different eras and cultural contexts? One important theoretical response to the films that can help to explicate what is both difficult and valuable in Antonioni's films can be found in Gilles Deleuze's two books on the cinema, *Cinema 1: The movement-image* and *Cinema 2: The time-image* [\(2\)](#). Drawing on Deleuze's concept of the “time-image” in particular, I will focus on the qualities that seem most central to the intense responses, both positive and negative, which a film like *L'avventura* elicits from viewers and critics: its rendering of time and space – as *seen*, *felt* and *thought*.

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Antonioni once described his 1957 film *Il grido* as “neorealism without the bicycle”. Deleuze responds to this idea, saying: “Bicycle-less neo-realism replaces the last quest involving movement (the trip) with a specific weight of time operating inside characters and excavating them from within” (3). While *L'avventura* is a kind of road movie, the classical ideals of action as means to successful and morally unambiguous subjective mastery and bringing about of narrative events become eclipsed in this “adventure” by the radically foregrounded power of temporal and spatial affectivity.

The “trip” here forces difficult time and space *inside* the characters, “excavating” their presumed agency and distinctiveness as subjects. Characters and viewers alike *feel* the sheer duration of on-screen events, the meanings of which are initially opaque, so that the subject is given too much time, and too much open space, in which to look and think. This process leads to a painful reflexive awareness of bodies and their ties to a universe in which time, allied to the materiality of the immanent world, reigns supreme in all its unpredictability.

Deleuze describes a perfect “double composition” in Antonioni's work between a cinema of the body and a cinema of the brain, showing their different speeds, so that we keep revolutionising our brain, while neglecting to update our body and its “feelings”. Deleuze highlights the importance in his theoretical response to cinema of Antonioni's work – its rendering of the body as it moves within, generating, and as filled by, time. No longer the instrument of action, the body “becomes rather the developer of time” (4). This body which is “never in the present”, containing “the before and the after”, generates and expresses moral and perceptual anxiety, says Deleuze, something which is written on the body as it moves through space:

Tiredness and waiting, even despair are the attitudes of the body. No one has gone further in this direction than Antonioni. His method: the interior through behavior, no longer experience, but “what remains of past experiences”, “what comes afterwards, when everything has been said”, such a method necessarily proceeds via the attitudes and postures of the body (5).

With Antonioni's time-image cinema, we are not actually allowed to see time. Unlike in *Citizen Kane*, *Last Year at Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961), or *8 1/2* (Federico Fellini, 1963), here the viewer is denied traditional flashbacks and temporal markers of how much time has passed since the last shot or scene, or unstable fragments of time. Instead, the viewer is forced to observe the temporalised body in *L'avventura*, as it experiences and emanates a heavy kind of moment-by-moment *duree* – a sense of relentless, barely moving time that hangs and hollows out the subject from within, without any refreshment from clearly marked recollection-images or intimations of oneiric temporality. We face a special and radical kind of time-image here and in other Antonioni films, but especially also perhaps *La notte* (1961) and *L'eclisse* (1962). It is the *manifestations* of relentless, non-teleological time that are seen and felt, not through expressionistic images or dialogue, but through the camera's observing of subjects in the geographical reality of their exterior life within a very immanent spatial and temporal real.

These characters may be inarticulate, their words awkward attempts to express existential disquiet. But their bodies speak loudly through the relation to their environment that, under the camera's relentless gaze and through Antonioni's famous framing, reminds us of the subject's real powerlessness in the face of primordial time and space. The viewer must *read* the body as positioned in space, seeking to think through its movements and ponder what kind of thought might be running through it.

Central to this is both on- and off- screen subjects' constant awareness of the body's excavation by temporality. Deleuze says “the daily attitude is what puts the before and

after into the body, time into the body”, and that this “attitude of the body relates thought to time...” (6) Within 20th century modernism's general crisis of forms, the idea of temporality as perhaps the *only* omnipresent form (one that has heterogeneous, non-teleological modes and affects) may cause troubled reactions ultimately because it positions the subject itself as both epistemologically and ontologically vertiginous. According to Deleuze, the tiredness of the affected body forces the brain to a new and difficult thought, reminding the subject of its own “embodied” time within that of the world.

Whether the actual onscreen subjects make the move into a fecund difficult thought is open to debate – but they do not have the viewer's advantage of Antonioni's images. Given the distance to witness the characters' experience of time and to codify hermeneutically what we see, although viewers can have the challenging pleasure of these films' alluring open images, we in turn suffer the film's *own* temporal affect.

Contrasting cinema with painting, Antonioni has said that for a painter it is a question of “discovering a static reality”, while for “a director, the problem is in taking a reality that grows and wears itself out, [...] a whole that is invisible and spread out in duration. And this duration informs it and determines its very essence” (7).

L'avventura In *L'avventura*, time causes anxiety not only for its narrative de-centring of the weight of the *duree*, but for the elliptical duration's sober destabilising of essence. This time moves slowly, hollowing out subjects and their agency, showing us a moment-by-moment, sublime and devastating temporal reality.

But while the seemingly dogged linearity of *L'avventura* disallows any *Last Year at Marienbad*-style ambiguous flashbacks or dramatic formal fragmentation, there is no sense of *telos* here either. Not only does the crisis forced by embodied time disallow the promise of closure or even a stable linear trajectory; there are also huge gaps in the *duree* – fissures that while far less initially apparent than those of *Marienbad* are perhaps ultimately more disturbing. Antonioni's films are made up of such seemingly inconsequential slabs of time, in between – and within – which operate insidious lacunae that we miss what we expect to see and see what we expect to miss. In *L'avventura* a temporal gap makes us actually miss the disappearance of Anna (whom we probably assumed was to be the main character of this story), when she silently exits the film.

While Anna's disappearance is disconcerting enough when it happens, we will later be confronted with a much more disturbing (though less narratively “dramatic”) fissure brought about by time that Pascal Bonitzer called “the disappearance of the disappearance” (8). This is perhaps the film's most radical formal-thematic element, its entropic tendency: our coming to forget, *through the passage of time*, a disappearance that only an hour earlier seemed so important. It is as if Marion Crane's death in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) occurring roughly at the same place in the narrative as does Anna's disappearance in *L'avventura*, was not only never coded as a death, or “solved”, but was actually – almost wilfully – forgotten about.

Irrespective of how one ultimately reads a film like *L'avventura*, one thing is certain with this time-image cinema: the powerful temporality that so radically challenges our thought, disabling action and undermining inherited metaphysical superstructures, escapes – even as it destroys – our visual-epistemophilic desire for control. We cannot see it, and we are at its mercy. Unlike the world itself, which is so undeniably *there* in the folds of this film's deep-focus vistas, time always escapes us – even as we cannot escape its heterogeneous affects. *L'avventura* leaves us with a very strong sense of time's

immediately felt but invisible trace, its haunted indexical markings on the world and the subject.

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Compared to the unnerving meta-visual plane of time (in which we only see the effects of temporal violence, not its actual cause), space in Antonioni's cinema can be seen directly. Phenomenal reality is given a very detailed and complex rendering through this filmmaker's famous compositions, making up the rich tapestry the films present as an entirely immanent universe.

Yet this space as framed by Antonioni's camera is ultimately no less destabilising than time. The framing of space problematises the relations between the onscreen subject, their gaze and that of the viewer. We are not only frequently confronted with “empty space” devoid of human or narrative centring, but when the human presence *does* arrive, people often enter the frame with their backs to the viewer. Alternatively, instead of a long or medium shot, a very large head will emerge in close-up, presenting us with only the abstract surface of hair and neck skin without a face: an alien shape which, while hardly satisfying the desire for conventional anthropocentric images, nonetheless provides an abstract “figure” to the “ground” of a previously flattened space.

This frequent lack of anthropocentric images and gazes brings about an unnerving affectivity for the viewer. Deleuze discusses the haunted nature of a space that constantly threatens subjects in Antonioni's films – and from which they *come* and disappear *into*, as the viewer contemplates an image that frustrates their desired access to, and understanding of, the subject onscreen. When the people are present, they often don't seem there for *us*, staring out the window at their reality within what is for us a framed image complete with onscreen spectator looking out at the world through their own frame. In contrast to Ingmar Bergman's massive close-ups of the face in which the subject stares straight out at the viewer, here on- and off-screen subjects gaze ahead at the same vista. But while the diegetic subjects may turn their backs on the audience to look toward their world, we continue to look upon them in their averted gaze until we feel it become negatively directed back at us *through* its refusal (9).

In these moments when the on-screen subject denies us his or her face, we as viewers are prompted towards a reflexive kind of thought and looking in which we come to feel a virtual gaze directed upon *us*. And like temporality, as we cannot actually see the averted, reflexive gaze, its virtuality can be enacted from entirely off-screen. The most famous instance of this is the absent gaze of Anna after she disappears from the screen in *L'avventura*. Her gaze haunts the viewer and those who remain in the film, becoming internalised to the point of repression by Claudia and Sandro as they explore their affair while still tokenly looking for Anna, (and likewise the viewer's internalisation of her invisible gaze over proceedings is anxiously suppressed as we increasingly ally ourselves with the new couple).

Despite the increasing affect on an interior, virtual gaze in *L'avventura*, a rigorous topographical realism is always maintained, with none of the crystalline time-space structures of Fellini's or Resnais' representations of interiority. Yet a geographically consistent world here causes immense disruption, especially for a figure like Sandro, who seems almost at times parodically to be trying to enact a kind of movement-image subjectivity that is impossible in this time-image world. As Deleuze suggests, it is “no longer a motor extension which is established” between subject and real world “but rather a dreamlike connection through the intermediary of the liberated sense organs. It is as if

action floats in the situation, rather than bringing it to a conclusion or strengthening it” (10).

This floating action is often in the form of characters being forced into simply looking and thinking, the evolution of the subject Deleuze saw in Italian neo-realism from *doer* to *seer*. Deleuze discusses how in Antonioni, this epistemologically impoverished but very open gaze is both directed outwards upon the world, and internalised as characters attempt to reconcile the difficult thought which this new seeing generates with the tired emotional investments of their bodies. Here both the seen and the unseen gaze seek the lost “self” rather than the maternal or erotic “other”, Deleuze suggesting the deserted space from which the characters have been emptied “refers back again to the lost gaze of the being who is absent from the world as much as from himself” (11).

Time destabilises the subject's ability to master space, both in the way we look at the world on-screen and in the way the people interact with their strange diegetic home, as lost subjects under their own gaze. We watch the people in their desperate acting out of the erotic impulse, seeking to avert their eyes and minds from both the abyss of their presumed essence and the grasping of their brains' difficult future potentiality, while the temporal and spatial decentredness they seem to experience also induces vertigo in the viewer.

Although insisting Antonioni is not a depressing filmmaker, Deleuze implicitly admits a film like *L'avventura* is in many ways uncomfortable to watch, not only because its time-images force the brain to difficult thought, but due to the devastating ontological effect of Antonioni's radical use of space. Whereas Bergman confronted the face irrevocably with the void in films like *Persona* (1966), Deleuze suggests, Antonioni disappears the face, instead making the “affective instance” into “that of the any-space-whatever, which Antonioni in turn pushes as far as the void” (12).

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes describes how, initially, photography photographed the notable, but that soon it made “notable whatever it photographs. The 'anything whatever' then becomes the sophisticated acme of value” (13). Antonioni makes notable that which is filmed, entirely independent of narrative and anthropocentric usefulness. This can involve everyday time and space, but also milieus that confront the modern subject with a primordial space-time. Like Death Valley in *Zabriskie Point* (1969), the ancient space and time of the volcanic island in *L'avventura* is visited by bored, modern explorers, becoming an any-space-whatever. While they walk over its pre-historic terrain beneath a tornado sky and above an angry sea, we watch bodies confronted with sublime immensities in the face of which these subjects appear powerless and absurd, along with their metaphysical schemas. Deleuze discusses how the minutiae of everyday personal interaction is revealed as epistemologically impotent in the face of forces the subject can't control, an encounter reported by Antonioni's camera but not explained:

The method of report in Antonioni [...] always has this function of bringing idle periods and empty spaces together: drawing all the consequences from a decisive past experience, once it is done and everything has been said (14).

L'avventura The island may be a dramatic and photogenic space, but the any-space-whatever is defined less by its actual content than the question of whether it is an identifiable and centred space (a canvas on which subjectivity-affirming action can occur), or an opening to the decentred ambiguity and confronting temporality of the world. So even the drama of Anna's disappearance and the anguished, drawn-out search that begins, is reported via Antonioni's abstract, pseudo-documentary gaze.

As space and time are so formally and thematically connected in Antonioni's cinema, the most obvious “anything-whatevers” usually coincide with the famous *temps mort* shots that so perturbed the Cannes audience, and which preoccupy critics. These moments occur when the image continues after narrative usefulness has ended, or when the people have left the frame, leaving us with a non-anthropocentric image of the world. The “dead time” description is in at least one sense misleading. It is not time, or space, which is dead; these violent primordial forces are never more *alive* and devastating than at such moments.

Yet the *temps mort* does bring a certain death, a violence – something that can easily be overlooked when we examine a film like this through the lens of Deleuze's philosophy. These moments, so ubiquitous in Antonioni's cinema that it is very difficult to pinpoint when a *temps mort* shot or sequence is *not* in effect, inflict fissures onto the diegesis (perhaps even terminally), severing narrative control, killing our desired centring of human presence, destroying the subject's ontological confidence in itself – and, of course, coldly reminding us of our own enforced personal *telos*.

The heavy emphasis on violent temporal and spatial materiality throughout Antonioni's films enforces an awareness of such immanent primordial forms' enforcement of death. As Deleuze obliquely states in *Cinema 2*, the temporalised body ultimately becomes “a revealer of the deadline” (15) as the subject's increased awareness and generation of temporal forces makes the fact of its own death difficult to suppress. This facing up to primordial facts about ourselves, as we exist within brutal time and space, necessarily wreaks difficult and devastating affectivity. For Deleuze, this is a necessary phase, a violence we must work with so as to properly destroy hegemonic ontological formations that are the root of so much ethico-political regression. But if a useful openness can emerge out of this cinema's rendering of crisis, one in which new thinking and potential action might be re-imagined and wrought, a film like *L'avventura* at the very most creates a space for such newness; it does not provide it with content.

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Considering the confronting affects produced by *L'avventura*'s temporality and rendering of space, it's not surprising that 1960s viewers treated Antonioni, along with Bergman, as personifying depressing art-house cinema. Yet if Antonioni's films were in the past frequently seen as rendering a particularly nihilistic existentialism, and the space they opened up for post-ontological possibility was often overlooked, it might be said that our engagement with Deleuze's treatment of Antonioni in conceptualising the time-image often underplays the ontological violence that arguably remains the central affective experience of a film like *L'avventura*. It is easier to talk about and think through the time-image in the abstract than to watch and think afresh a film that inspires its theorisation.

Deleuze engages closely in *Cinema 2* with films he sees as exemplifying the modern cinema in its engagement with time at the expense of movement. While his often richly cinephilic readings of various films are followed by consistent philosophical analysis fleshing out Deleuze's philosophical understanding of time, sometimes the films he discusses seem to dovetail a little too neatly with what can appear to be an a priori program at work in the cinema books.

As Paul Patton admitted at the concluding forum of the “Considering Deleuze” symposium at the University of NSW in October 2002, despite Deleuze's obvious commitment to cinema over a long period, the basic philosophical project he developed throughout diverse writings over more than 30 years remained exactly the same in his work before, through and after *Cinema 1* and 2 (16). What emerged strongly throughout

UNSW's symposium is that perhaps the most notable element of Deleuze's thought that remains unscathed in his encounter with cinema is an idiosyncratic utopianism. This crystallises around Deleuze's understanding of "becoming" as the proper replacement for the disastrous ontological investments and justifications that brought about the ethico-political violence of the movement-image.

Deleuze jumps from describing the movement-image and its progress towards breakdown following World War Two in *Cinema 1*, to a celebratory account of the time-image in *Cinema 2*, articulating how ontologically emancipatory and ethically advanced the more modern image really is. Antonioni features strongly in this agenda, and Deleuze seeks to paint the filmmaker as not being the dour prophet of existential gloom and alienation his image would suggest: "Antonioni does not criticise the modern world, in whose possibilities he profoundly believes: he criticises the coexistence in the world of a modern brain and a tired, worn-out, neurotic body" (17). But Deleuze positions the crisis of the subject's embodied ontological investments as something able to be transcended through the superior capabilities of the more modern brain, as forced by the time-image into difficult thought. This is where he sees Antonioni's – and the modern cinema's – transformative, hopeful power (18).

The paradigmatic crisis that forced the movement-image into breakdown is a generative event that gives birth to the time-image. But violence doesn't stop with the movement-image's (supposed) death. The new image can surely only continue to exist through the necessary *continuation* of that violence, as applied to the internal superstructures by which we live – our moral values, ethics and political ideals. Violence specific to the movement-image universe itself might be overcome in the more progressive time-image for Deleuze, but the ontological violence that forces the failing movement-image to a point of crisis allows the time-image to keep asserting itself in the face of a continuing movement-image cinema (which in reality has not been historically overcome). The crisis of being and action as forced by time's destructive power is both the source of the time-image's powerful opening up to post-ontological possibility, *and* its constant source of horror – a continuing crisis that cannot easily be effaced or transcended.

Deleuze's descriptions of *L'avventura* and other key European films in *Cinema 2* provide some sense of the violence and nihilism that drives the cinema so important to his project. But ultimately the most disturbing and destabilising elements of the films and their affectivity are often elided in favour of the utopianism that makes up the "positive" trajectory of Deleuze's philosophy.

To watch *L'avventura* afresh is to view images that cast violence upon the metaphysical superstructures of modernity and its inherited values, but which also suggest what might be made possible *through* that violence: an incredible empathy and openness. However, any new, replacement subject formations and ethical frameworks are always necessarily to-come. To shy away either from the difficult experience of ontological violence *or* from the amorphous not-yet shapes and open futures *L'avventura* also renders, is to close off the film.

In many ways, an encounter with this film may be even stranger than in 1960, despite Antonioni's enormous influence on other filmmakers. It shows us how far the presentation and destabilising power of time and space can be pushed in feature-film cinema. *L'avventura*'s own temporality as a text is now quite odd – reaching forward to us like science-fiction from an exotic "modernist" past, as we in our new century debate the transforming role the moving image has played in re-making time and space. It renders, *in* and *through* time and space, crisis-ridden subjectivities which are confronted with the need for difficult thought (without necessarily accepting its challenge), as they drag their

creative future potential and tired bodies across what is for us a freshly destabilised world.

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Endnotes:

1. In the face of its controversial initial reception, the eventual prize at Cannes that year – which still advertises the film to this day (the print used for the American DVD of *L'avventura* starts by quoting that first Cannes award) plus the many other prizes the film went on to receive – did not mean Antonioni had definitively broken through the considerable resistance to his style. His work would elicit radically divergent responses from viewers and critics throughout Antonioni's career, and reception at Cannes continued to exemplify the dichotomy. At the premiere of *L'elisse* in 1962, viewers were equally divided between those who thought it was an even more repugantly pretentious art-house refusal of narrative cinema's prime directive than *L'avventura* (again letting their opinions be known during the screening), and those who considered *L'eclisse* Antonioni's boldest, most perfect work yet. Both films are still guaranteed to elicit strong reactions.
2. Gilles Deleuze, (1983): *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986; and (1985): *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, University of Minnesota Press, 1989. Even though these books have been available in English translation for over ten years, the effect of Deleuze's work on academic film studies has really gained momentum more recently.
3. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p.23.
4. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. xi.
5. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p.189.
6. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p.189.
7. Michelangelo Antonioni (1996): *The Architecture of Vision*, eds Carlo di Carlo, Giorgio Tinazzi & Marga Cottino Jones, Marsilio, New York, 1996, p.xxvi.
8. “L'avventura is ostensibly the story of a disappearance”, Bonitzer says, “but a disappearance whose importance and density evaporate little by little, until the very structure and form of the narrative are perilously contaminated and impaired; what happens in reality is *the disappearance of the disappearance* of Anna (which, however, does not mean her return). An odd story. *A Woman Disappears*: such a title might as easily suggest an exciting chase”. Pascal Bonitzer, “The Disappearance (on Antonioni)”

in *L'avventura: Michelangelo Antonioni, Director*, eds Seymour Chatman & Guido Fink, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, 1989, p. 213.

9. In this way the famous final montage of *L'eclisse*, in which for seven minutes what now seems to be a pseudo-documentary camera shows us images of a familiar suburban space from which the subjects who were our fictional protagonists have now literally disappeared, in fact only makes literal what happens throughout Antonioni's cinema. It is simply the logical and confronting apogee of this director's treatment of the moving image's ambivalent relationship to the human subject and the relationship between their gaze and ours, and the camera's fascination with the world beyond an anthropocentric kind of looking.

10. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 4

11. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 9

12. Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, p. 122

13. Roland Barthes (1980): *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard, Vintage, London, 1981, p. 34.

14. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 7.

15. *Cinema 2*, p. 189.

16. Paul Patton, in response to a question from the author at the "Considering Deleuze" symposium, University of New South Wales, October 3, 2002.

17. *Cinema 2*, pp. 204–5.

18. Deleuze does say "Antonioni's formula is valid for him only, it is he who invents it. Bodies are not destined for wearing out, any more than the brain is destined for novelty... There is as much thought in the body as there is shock and violence in the brain. There is an equal amount of feeling in both of them" (*Cinema 2*, p. 205). But Deleuze's interests in making sure Antonioni is a hopeful, post-ontological filmmaker are also clear when on the same page he elaborates on this cinema as a "dual composition" between the body and the brain. While Antonioni shows "all the tiredness of the world and modern neurosis" as rendered through the body, Deleuze says that "what is important is the possibility of a cinema of the brain which brings together all the powers..." This cinema of the brain, according to Deleuze, "reveals the creativity of the world, its colours aroused by a new space-time, its powers multiplied by artificial brains. If Antonioni is a great colourist, it is because he has always believed in the colours of the world, in the possibility of creating them, and of renewing all our cerebral knowledge. He is not an author who moans about the impossibility of communicating in the world. It is just that

the world is painted in splendid colours, while the bodies which people it are still insipid and colourless. The world awaits its inhabitants, who are still lost in neurosis” (pp. 204–5).

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